Whatever It Takes

by

wheatear

Jessica Jones (TV)

Complete

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wheatear

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Summary

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Description:

After breaking free of Kilgrave, Trish vowed that she'd never let it happen again. She'd find a way to protect people. She'd find a way to protect herself.

(Or: A different take on Trish's transformation into Hellcat.)

1. British Man Makes Indecent Proposal

Trish Walker was on top of the world.

It was fitting, then, that the party took place on a rooftop terrace. Fitting that on the day of the best scoop of her career, she was surrounded by friends and family, and with her journalist partner and boyfriend of eight months, Griffin Sinclair, on her arm. Even her mother's beaming smile couldn't spoil her mood.

"Congratulations!" she heard many times over. "Congratulations!"

She could never hear it enough, really.

"Great job," Griffin whispered in her ear. "You look amazing."

And she did, she thought, in her flower print designer dress and killer heels. For a surprise party, she'd scrubbed up well.

She took a sip of champagne, scanning the crowd. Everyone was dressed in expensive, tailored suits or designer gowns. The setting sun threw a golden halo over proceedings so that she could almost imagine they were a heavenly choir, or a gathering of the gods on Mount Olympus. They were in the heart of Manhattan, surrounded by glass skyscrapers, the dirt and noise of the New York traffic far away below. She'd rubbed shoulders with people like these for most of her life, but the one person she was missing wouldn't dress like them, would stand out from the crowd like a sore thumb…

"Patsy!"

A voice from over her shoulder. Only two people called her that. Dorothy Walker, her mother and ex-manager, who was arguing with a waiter over the tepidity of the champagne, and the man striding up to her with a familiar, frustrated expression.

Kilgrave.

Yeah, so that was a long story. It would make for a great article, she thought, a proper exposé of government cover-ups, human rights violations and at the centre of it all, a violent psychopath with mind control abilities that would make any conspiracy theorist go nuts. The clicks she'd generated with today's story would be blown out of the water.

Speaking of… He thrust a copy of the *New York Examiner* in her face, her headline screaming out at her:

SOKOVIA ACCORDS — EXTRAORDINARY LEGISLATION PUTS SUPERHEROES UNDER FIRE

"What the hell is this?"

She raised an eyebrow as Griffin put a protective arm around her waist. "Hard-hitting journalism."

"Bullshit. This is cheating. I told you not to—"

“Whoa, hang on a second,” said Griffin. “Let’s not be rude here — what do you mean, cheating?”

“Piss off,” said Kilgrave, and Trish rolled her eyes as her boyfriend obediently took off.

“You’re not supposed to compel him. Where’s Jessica?”

That was the person she’d been looking for. Jessica tended to avoid her whenever she was with Griffin. Something about Griffin’s accent creeping her out. Sure, he was British like Kilgrave and they both had dark hair and eyes, but the physical similarity ended there. Griffin had an open, friendly face, handsome and square-jawed. If one were to draw a superhero, he’d be the perfect poster boy. Kilgrave was taller and thinner, his features sharper, and there was an intensity in his eyes that either attracted or repelled; it was impossible to feel neutral about him. Of course, her perception was coloured by the fact that she knew what kind of man he was. Or what kind of monster.

“Don’t deflect,” said Kilgrave, even while she returned to scanning the crowd, knowing that Jessica would be lurking somewhere. “This isn’t your story. You know that.”

“It’s got my name on it,” she replied breezily.

There was Jessica, skulking in a corner with a glass of champagne. She’d bothered to wear a dress, purple — Kilgrave’s influence — but she still looked like she might punch someone. Trish caught her eye, waving her over.

“Jessica, tell her,” said Kilgrave at once, spotting her too. “This is unacceptable.”

“I’m sure Jessica can speak for herself,” said Trish, though her heart had leapt. It was true that she hadn’t consulted Jessica before publishing the article. It had been too good a story to pass up.

Kilgrave passed the newspaper over to Jessica as soon as she joined them, Jessica taking a moment to read the headline, and Trish’s stomach plummeted. Suddenly she didn’t feel so great about it. Jessica’s expression was unreadable, her eyes downcast. Trish held her breath.

“You know what,” said Jessica. “I don’t give a shit. Maybe for once in your life you could stop being so selfish and not put a goddamn spotlight over our heads at the worst possible time.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do — it’s important, the world needs to know about this.”

Jessica gave her a piercing look. “Does Trish Walker need to be the one to break the news? It was gonna be announced tomorrow anyway but you just had to get your scoop.”

“Is this a problem for you? Really? What’s the big deal?”

What did they think, that the feds would burst in on them in the middle of the night? Because she’d leaked a story? With their gifts, it was nothing they couldn’t handle, and besides she’d be the one in trouble. It was her article. She’d done nothing wrong.

Part of her hoped that she’d face a legal challenge. It’d give her more material.

Jessica looked pissed and Kilgrave remained stony-faced, but they were interrupted by her mother tapping her on the shoulder.

“Patsy, come and see!”

Dorothy looked terribly excited. She’d made a particular effort to impress today, hair festooned with a truly garish fascinator, but Trish didn’t realise the significance of that until her mother pulled her towards the centre of the terrace.

Griffin was standing on a raised platform, tapping his champagne glass with a spoon to get the crowd’s attention. Always pleasing to the eye, he made for a handsome profile silhouetted by the setting sun.

Then he started talking, and Trish’s heart sank. This had been planned. Dorothy was in on it.

“Today I have a very important question to ask to the woman I love,” Griffin said, watched by at least fifty onlookers. “So I brought our friends and family together because, well, I want you to feel pressured. And because your answer means too much to me to leave any wriggle room.”

She’d already been caught off-guard by Kilgrave and Jessica and their less than pleased reactions to her work today. She could only stare at Griffin, her mouth agape. He wasn’t really going to…

“So here we are,” said Griffin, lifting his glass, “coming together to celebrate Trish Walker and the wonderful piece of journalism she published today, but also, I hope, to celebrate something personal. Something between the two of us. Trish, ever since you walked into my office and my life, I was, well, I was bowled over. And you continue to be amazing every day, and I stand here and I think, I don’t want it to end. I want this to be every day, for the rest of our lives. What do you say, Trish Walker? I’m asking you to marry me.”

He was looking directly at her and she was looking back, and she could *feel* all the eyes on them. Oh, God. This couldn’t be more awkward. She’d known him for eight months! She liked him, sure, and he’d been especially helpful when she’d started out as a freelance reporter and he’d helped her find her way around the news networks, learn the journalistic conventions that she hadn’t known before starting this job. They made a great team, both at work and at home.

The problem was… Well, the problem was Kilgrave. She glanced over at the pair of them. Jessica looked disbelieving, Kilgrave highly entertained. He saw her looking and winked, and Trish quickly looked away.

The problem was Kilgrave.

Because Griffin couldn’t know. He knew about Jessica’s powers, she’d trusted him with that information a few months in, but even if Jessica hadn’t sworn her to secrecy, she couldn’t have told him about Kilgrave. Tell him that they’d kept a mind controlling psychopath in Jessica’s apartment for nearly a year? It was insane.

She hadn’t thought their relationship was serious, let alone considered marriage. Steady, yes. Serious, no. And he hadn’t discussed it with her. This proposal had come completely out of the blue.

“Trish?”

She blinked, meeting Griffin's eyes, realising that the crowd was still watching her expectantly. They needed an answer. She couldn't humiliate him in front of everyone. But she couldn't say yes either.

"Thank you," she managed instead, and the answer sounded lame and shaky to her ears but people seemed to buy it. Applause broke out, her mother leading it, and Griffin smiled.

He stepped down from the platform and approached her, and her smile froze. She backed up, finding Kilgrave next to her.

"Can you tell him to go to the bathroom?"

She just — she needed five minutes. Kilgrave rolled his eyes but complied. Griffin squeezed her hand, told her that he needed to pop to the bathroom but he wouldn't be long, and then he was gone and she fled from the crowd, Kilgrave and Jessica following her.

They ended up in a conference room on the floor below the roof terrace. Jessica sprawled on one of the chairs to read the newspaper article she'd taken from Kilgrave while Trish paced around with folded arms. She shot an accusing look at Kilgrave who was helping himself to a glass of sparkling water.

"Did you make him propose?"

"No. Poor sod did that all by himself. He really is smitten by you… but you don't care, do you? You've been stringing him along."

"I haven't, I just…" She sighed. "I don't want to marry him. Can't you tell him to back off?"

"You should tell him to back off," Jessica interrupted. "Don't be a coward."

"Afraid he won't take no for an answer?"

Kilgrave's eyes were calculating. He never did anything like this without demanding something in return and he'd already compelled Griffin for her once. If she wanted his help, she'd have to pay for it. That was how she'd gotten her break as a journalist in the first place. The price for that had been a key to her apartment. She'd asked him why. He'd said he liked her interior decorating.

She and Griffin had a conversation. He left upset, and she deleted his number from her phone.

She didn't actually feel bad at all.

The hardest task was explaining the situation to Dorothy. Trish offered to accompany her home so that they could have a semi-private conversation, and she got more than an earful. It seemed her mother had set her heart on this marriage. Maybe she'd bullied Griffin into proposing so early, she thought. She wouldn't put it past her.

As always, it was tempting to ask for Kilgrave's help, but she couldn't owe him any more favours.

She stuck her hand out for a taxi on the blazing hot sidewalk, her dress beginning to stick to her skin. Dorothy rummaged in her enormous handbag.

“I don’t know how you do it,” she was saying. “I should’ve known you’d find some way to mess this up.”

Trish gritted her teeth. “Can we talk about this later?”

Dorothy fished out her keys and made an exasperated sound — not what she was looking for. Meanwhile the cab Trish had hailed pulled up and she opened the door, about to step in, when a man wearing a dark red baseball cap shoved past Dorothy, hitting her on the shoulder. Her mother made an even more exasperated sound — more of a squeal, really — and Trish looked up as the man snatched her crocodile skin handbag and tore off across the street.

“Oh my God—”

She met her mother’s eyes, their expressions mirroring the same shock and outrage, and then Trish pelted after him.

“Hey! Stop!”

The sign said “Walk”. She dashed past the other pedestrians, keeping her eyes fixed on that red baseball cap as the thief reached the other sidewalk, the hard tarmac pounding beneath her heels. A few bystanders gave them startled looks. No one attempted to stop him.

“Patsy! Patsy, get back here!”

Her mother’s voice floated after her, annoyed as hell. She reached the sidewalk, almost twisting her ankle but righting herself at the last second, but it was already obvious that the thief was losing her. A tight dress and high heels might look good at a party. It wasn’t good for running. She kept it up for a few more yards until she lost sight of the thief in the crowd, forcing her to give up. She hadn’t gone far but she was sweating, hair damp.

She’d lost him. Was never even close, and she hadn’t gotten a good look at him either, wouldn’t be able to identify him. Dark hair visible under the baseball cap, a nondescript brown jacket, jeans, average height, average build.

A thought rankled in her head: if Jessica had been here, she would have caught him. Jessica was faster, stronger, than any man. She would have stopped him and retrieved the handbag, no sweat.

But she wasn’t here, because she’d left with Kilgrave.

Trish swallowed, trying to contain her dejection as she shuffled back to the waiting cab where Dorothy was unimpressed.

She sat in the back of the taxi, closed her eyes and pinched her nose with a sigh.

“What a ridiculous stunt,” said Dorothy. “What would you have done if you’d caught up with him? You think your silly Krav Maga would do any good? And you could have broken your ankle. Give me your phone.”

“Huh?”

“I lost my handbag, you dolt. It had my phone, my credit cards, everything. The bag alone was worth over two thousand dollars. I need to call the bank. And the cops.”

She twirled her house keys around her fingers as she spoke, the only thing the thief hadn’t managed to snatch. At least she wouldn’t have to change her locks, Trish thought. Her house was still secure. But that was pure luck.

Her day had been going so well. How was it fair that a stranger could burst into their lives and cause chaos with no repercussions? How was it fair that she couldn’t stop him?

She was Trish Walker. She was an ace journalist, a superstar, a celebrity. She’d clawed her way up from nothing and in these crucial moments when she had a chance to help someone, to stop a crime, everything she’d worked for meant nothing. It achieved diddly squat.

It wasn’t fair.

She arrived back home late in the evening preoccupied by thoughts of heroic deeds, running through scenarios of the bag snatcher again and again in her mind, scenarios where she caught him, where she spotted him before he shoved Dorothy, showed him that there was some justice in this sad and dangerous world.

She opened the door to find the lights already switched on and—

Oh, God.

She dropped her keys, staring.

Jessica and Kilgrave.

Jessica and Kilgrave in her kitchen, pressed up against the refrigerator, his back to her, Jessica’s legs wrapped around his hips and his pants around his ankles, shirt hanging loose… They were panting, Jessica throwing her head back as her fingers dug into his shoulder blades.

Heat flooded her cheeks. Holy fuck.

She bent down to pick up her keys and Jessica’s eyes opened, spotting her over Kilgrave’s shoulder.

“Shit!”

Her feet hit the floor pretty damn quick and then Kilgrave was turning to look at her and she did not want to see them like this, sweaty and half-naked, what the *fuck*.

“I — sorry!” Trish garbled, and ran for the bedroom as fast as her high heels could take her.

Once in there, she slammed the door shut, sat down on her bed, and took deep breaths. What was Jessica thinking? It wasn’t — she made herself think the word — it couldn’t be rape, could it? What leverage could Kilgrave possibly have over her to make Jessica sleep with him again under her nose? But Jessica had looked like she was enjoying it. The way her bare legs had wrapped around his hips, her lips parted, the sounds she’d made…

She clasped her hands in her lap, trying to shake the image out of her head. It wasn't something she'd ever wanted to see, not least because it was Jessica, not least because she was with *him*. And to think, she'd needed Jessica earlier tonight, or Kilgrave, either of them could have caught the thief, and instead of being there for her Jessica had slipped back to her apartment with Kilgrave so they could — they could do *this*.

Jessica should be out there being the hero and instead she was fucking the devil.

He was supposed to be their prisoner. That was why they were here. Jessica had finally agreed, after months of Trish trying to persuade her, that she could share the burden of watching over Kilgrave. So for one night every week they would stay over at her apartment, and Trish would do what she called a "Kilgrave debrief" with Jessica, checking in on everything they'd been up to in the past week, making sure that Jessica was okay and that Kilgrave hadn't done anything evil.

Yet she hadn't seen this coming.

Maybe in recent months Kilgrave had gained a little too much freedom. A favour here, a concession there… It was surprising how quickly it added up. And she hadn't seen them in person at all last month because they'd been away doing a favour for the newly announced Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross, the government official who was responsible for keeping them both out of jail.

That was how the Sokovia Accords had come about. You didn't get 117 countries to approve it so quickly without a little extra persuasion. Obviously she hadn't put that part in the article.

Had something happened while they were away? Was that it? She bit her lip. The only way to find out was to ask and this was her apartment, after all; she had every right to demand an explanation.

There was a soft knock at her door. Trish looked up, expecting to see Jessica, but it was Kilgrave that entered.

"Sorry you had to see that."

He didn't look sorry at all. He'd changed into a bathrobe and his hair was mussed, a few tufts sticking up at the back.

"What do you want?"

He shut the door behind him, coming in. "I came to apologise."

"For what? The fact that you and Jessica were having sex in my apartment? Or the fact that you got caught?"

"For being indiscreet. We're your guests; we should have treated your home with respect."

"Since when do you care about respect?"

Her fingernails dug into her palms. She couldn't forget not only what he'd done to Jessica, but what he'd done to her. He wasn't ever supposed to be alone with her.

“What you saw just now, that changes things. I don’t want things to be awkward between us.”

“Was that the first time? I mean, since living with Jessica.”

“No.”

His gaze was steady. She had no reason to disbelieve him, but no reason to trust him either. She’d have to ask Jessica all the same questions to be sure of the truth.

“What’s going on? If you’re forcing her…”

“Forcing her?” His eyebrows shot up. “No. Never.”

“Then why isn’t she here talking to me instead of you?”

She was angry, Trish realised, surprised by the tremor in her own voice. Angry at Jessica for her lack of self-control. She couldn’t always be the responsible one, and yet ever since Kilgrave had entered their lives, she’d done nothing but. Being there for Jessica. Helping Jessica. Supporting Jessica. Dealing with Dorothy.

Dealing with *him*.

“Embarrassed, I should think,” said Kilgrave, seemingly oblivious to her rising temper. He glanced at the wall that separated her bedroom from the guest room that Jessica slept in. “Believe what you want, but you saw us together. We’re in love.”

Her mouth pinched. “No, you’re not.”

“You think you know everything about me, don’t you? Me and Jessica. Well, let me tell you something. You don’t know Jessica half as well as you think you do, and you don’t know me either. I saw your bloodless little romance with the journalist. You used him as another rung on your career ladder and you didn’t feel a thing for him because you don’t feel. You’re cold and stuck-up and if you go running your prissy mouth off to Jessica about how I don’t care for her or some other bullshit, I will make you regret it.”

He moved forward as he spoke, looming over her from her place on the bed, and she shivered at the look in his eyes.

“What do you want?”

He couldn’t control her. Jessica had seen to that. But her anger evaporated as he sat down next to her instead and she tensed up. Jessica was next door. He wouldn’t dare try anything with Jessica next door, would he?

“Actually, that’s the question I want to ask you.” He reached out and brushed her earring between finger and thumb, the jangle of metal seeming loud in the quiet room. “Are you enjoying your new job, Patsy? Writing all these words about the deeds of your superiors. Doesn’t it get, I don’t know, dull?”

She didn’t know where he was going with this. “It’s my career, I chose it. If you don’t have anything useful to say, then you can leave. You shouldn’t be here, you should be with Jessica.”

“Good of you to say it,” he said, “but there is another reason I want to talk to you. Tell me: how badly do you want to be a superhero?”

She blinked.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Course you do. You want it badly, Patsy. You’re obsessed, always have been. Obsessed with Jessica. Obsessed with whatever hijinks the Avengers are getting up to nowadays. You remember last year, when we took down IGH?”

She nodded, unable to speak. She felt like there was a wasp caught in her throat.

“There’s still one loose end from that particular investigation. Doctor Karl Malus. We never found him. What if I told you that I’d tracked him down?”

“You — you have?”

She remembered. She’d spoken to his colleague Doctor Kozlov, and learned that Malus was the one responsible for Jessica’s powers. She’d hoped to meet him and yes, for a few hours she had been excited at the possibility that she might convince Malus to perform the same operation on her. That she might become gifted like Jessica.

She was so sick of being helpless.

“I have,” said Kilgrave. “I could take you to him. Persuade him to turn you into a superhero, if you want. Do you?”

“I…”

She licked her lips and paused, Kilgrave tilting his head at her. No matter how often she’d fantasized about it, she’d accepted the fact that it wasn’t a real possibility. And now Kilgrave was offering it to her?

“What’s the catch?”

He smiled, and she thought of a shark. All those teeth. “It’s simple. I’ll take you to Malus. All you have to do is spend one night with me.”

A night. As in…

Her skin prickled. Suddenly she didn’t know what to do with her hands. “You mean… sex?”

“If I feel like it. And anything else I want. As if I’m controlling you. No permanent damage, I promise.”

She stared at him.

He’d never tried anything with her. If anything, they shared a mutual disgust. And now he was talking about — God, she didn’t know, torture? Whatever sexual perversion he cared to inflict? She and Jessica hadn’t talked about it. What he was like in bed — or on any flat surface, judging by what she had just witnessed. She didn’t know if he was sadistic, though she knew that he was cruel.

The thought of setting aside the agency that she and Jessica had fought so hard to protect, even for one night, to let him do whatever he wanted to her… She felt hot and cold all over and she had to look away, biting her lip.

She didn't want to admit how that made her feel. The fear of losing control.

Kilgrave was watching her and she made herself look at him, saying the first thing that came to mind.

"What about you and Jessica?"

"What Jessica doesn't know won't hurt her."

She shook her head. "You're such a bastard."

Moments after he'd claimed that he and Jessica were in love and he was doing this. How brazen could he be?

"I don't hear a no." He stood up. "I'll let you think about it. Come to me when you're ready."

He slipped out of the room, leaving her with the memory of his presence like smoke in the air, like hot metal. Her throat constricted.

She thought about going over to find Jessica.

On balance, she decided it wasn't a good idea.

2. Woman Sells Body for Mystery Experiment

"Coffee?" Trish asked. "Apple juice? Or something stronger? I could make a lemon spritzer."

Jessica hadn't said a word since shuffling into the kitchen. She sat hunched at the breakfast bar and she was very definitely not looking at the fridge. Trish couldn't help glancing at it. It seemed surreal, what she'd witnessed last night and then the conversation with Kilgrave afterwards. Like it had been a fever dream, some trick of her imagination. She'd only seen them together for a few seconds, but…

Well, it raised so many uncomfortable questions.

When Jessica didn't respond, Trish sighed and made coffee. She wasn't going to feed Jessica's drinking problem if she didn't ask. Kilgrave was taking a shower so this was her first opportunity to talk to Jessica about what had happened.

She slid the coffee mug over to Jessica and took a seat next to her. "A thief snatched Mother's handbag last night."

Jessica looked up, startled. She gave Trish a questioning look and Trish shrugged.

"She called the cops. It's nothing she can't handle. I just… Well, I wish you had been there."

Jessica said nothing. The sharp look in her eyes suggested that she knew what Trish was driving at, but she wouldn't be drawn.

"I guess you had other things to do."

Nothing. Jessica drank her coffee, eyes downcast.

"Kilgrave told me it wasn't the first time," Trish went on. "Is that true?"

Jessica's mouth tightened. She looked ready to cry, but she didn't deny it.

"When did it start?"

Jessica swallowed. Trish saw the movement in her throat, watching her friend intently for every little reaction, every flicker in her expression. It was strange to think it, but she looked fragile. Skin and bone. She'd always been slim, but there was something about Jessica's fingers curled around the coffee mug, the joints of her wrists, her pale arms contrasting against her black T-shirt… Something limp and helpless in her posture, like a marionette with its strings cut.

Trish let the silence linger, and eventually Jessica lifted her head.

"A while ago," she said flatly.

"How long?" Trish asked.

"I don't know. Months."

She sucked in a breath. *Months?* The fact that Jessica was being so vague about it worried her all the more. She wouldn't admit to a date… which meant it was longer ago than she wanted to admit.

How could she not have seen this? How could she not have realised what was going on?

Trish phrased her next question as delicately as she could. "Is he… forcing you to sleep with him?"

"No."

"So you're a couple?"

"No!" Jessica shook her head, gesturing in exasperation. "I don't wanna talk about this, okay? I don't know what we are."

"Then why? Why have sex with him?"

She thought that Jessica had told her everything. She'd heard terrible things, things that had made her skin crawl, and yet through it all she had stuck with Jessica and Jessica had trusted her. So she'd thought.

And Kilgrave… He must have been laughing at her all this time. *Why* did he have such a hold over Jessica? Had they made some perverse deal like the one he'd offered to her last night?

Maybe some of her confusion and disbelief showed on her face because Jessica shook her head.

"You wouldn't understand."

"Don't say that. You slept with him in my apartment. The least you can do is offer some kind of explanation."

Especially given their history together. She was being pushy, putting pressure on an open wound, but she'd rather get it in the open than let it fester. Jessica grimaced, hesitating.

"I… I go to him every time I feel shitty about myself, okay. Every day I feel like shit, he gets to screw me."

"Jess…"

"Go on, tell me what a sicko I am. Tell me it's toxic and unhealthy and I should stop."

There was a long pause. Trish sighed, running a hand through her hair. "You already know that. Why do you need someone else to tell you to stop?"

"Because I don't trust myself."

"This was a bad idea."

"You think?"

Jessica's tone was incredulous, and something about it put Trish on edge. "Hey, I didn't know you were going to start screwing him! The whole point of this was to keep him contained and use his abilities for good, not to let him take control."

“He’s not in control.”

“Then who is?”

“Morning, ladies.”

She jerked up, almost spilling her coffee as Kilgrave ambled in, fully dressed after his shower. Their opportunity for conversation had ended. Jessica would now have to spend the full day with Kilgrave. All day, every day. That was what she did. That was the price she paid as Kilgrave’s warden.

Trish wished she had known how steep that price really was.

A week passed before she saw him again. Their next meeting was the regular scheduled “Kilgrave debrief” at her apartment. She’d ordered takeout because the thought of making dinner did not appeal to her after an exhausting day. All she could think about was Kilgrave. His offer. His price.

She couldn’t believe that she was contemplating this. But she was. She was contemplating it.

Could she accept it?

She didn’t have the same history with Kilgrave that he did with Jessica. He’d controlled her, yes, made her blow up a building, in fact — and she still had nightmares about that sometimes — but despite the violence, despite the sheer terror she’d felt in his presence, he’d never been intimate with her. He couldn’t play on that the way he must have played on it with Jessica.

It should have been me, she thought. *I should have been the one to take Kilgrave prisoner.*

During the day, she had carried on with her work as normal, reporting on news relating to people with abilities, her particular area of interest. A strange earthquake in New York City had caused minor disruption to traffic and created several sinkholes. It had started in Hell’s Kitchen, where Jessica lived, but did it have a more sinister origin? A few days later, the Midland Circle building in Hell’s Kitchen collapsed completely — another casualty of the earthquake?

She thought there was something more to it and in other circumstances she might have asked Kilgrave to persuade a few people to talk, but not right now.

Jessica didn’t say much, shovelling noodles into her mouth as if she were starving. Next to her, Kilgrave was far more animated, his eyes glinting with the secret they shared.

“Question for you, Trish,” he said, “now that you know about me and Jessica. Are we in a relationship? Jessica’s adamant that we’re not. Practically in denial.”

Trish looked across the table at Jessica, who shook her head mulishly.

“What do you mean, a relationship?”

“I mean, are we officially a couple?”

“No.”

That was Jessica, said with the exasperated force of someone who had said no many times and been ignored every time.

“Unofficially?”

“Still no.” Jessica stabbed a piece of egg. “Also never.”

“Well, I guess we know where Jessica stands,” said Trish, and Kilgrave gave her a look that she didn’t understand, a sly, knowing look. “Why don’t we talk about boundaries? Obviously we need to do a better job in setting them…”

“You’re one to talk about boundaries,” said Kilgrave, ‘given the way you keep invading ours,’ at the same time as Jessica said, “We? There’s no we. We already talked about this.”

They paused, looking at each other, and if Trish hadn’t felt like the odd one out already, she did now. Something silent passed between them, a flicker in their expressions — Jessica pressing her lips together, Kilgrave gazing at her for a moment before he turned back to Trish.

“You crossed a line when you published that article, Trish, why don’t we talk about that? Jessica and I worked bloody hard to make the Accords happen. I had to tell Ross to say that your surprise scoop was all planned.”

So that was why she’d heard nothing since publishing the article. Kilgrave had saved her from any consequences, but she wasn’t going to thank him for it.

“Then there’s no problem,” she said. “It’s resolved, move on. What isn’t resolved is this thing between you and Jess—”

“Which is none of your business,” Jessica interrupted her.

“It’s exactly why we’re here!”

She was so frustrated she could hardly speak. Jessica had agreed to this! Weekly debriefs, checking up on Kilgrave, all of it.

“You wanna talk boundaries?” said Jessica. “Kilgrave being a petty piece of shit, sure, let’s cover it. But I don’t need you micromanaging the boundaries I set with him. That’s my shit, I’ll deal with it. Move on.”

“Look,” said Trish, “I’m not a relationship counsellor—”

“No,” said Kilgrave, “and you’re not a journalist either. You got your position because I gave it to you and you’ve been faking it ever since.”

Jessica rolled her eyes, setting a hand on Kilgrave’s arm. Trish noticed that, and noticed how they stared her down, their expressions identical. It used to be Jessica and her presenting a united front, facing Kilgrave across the table. When had that changed?

Trish stood up. “I need to make a call. Feel free to grab dessert. You know where to find it.”

She grabbed her cell phone from the kitchen counter and walked off without looking at either of them, heading for her room.

She heard Kilgrave scraping his chair back. “Well, while we’re waiting, I may as well take a leak.”

Footsteps followed. Trish kept her head down, staring at her phone screen, then stopped before she reached her room, turning into the bathroom instead. Assuming Jessica was still at the dining table, she wouldn’t be able to see where they’d gone.

Her reflection looked back at her from the mirror over the sink. She was Trish Walker. Minor celebrity, failed superstar, fake journalist. Hair pinned back, silk blouse, fancy suit jacket. She looked the part. She could do that all right. But how could she make Jessica listen when she didn’t have any powers of her own? How could she save her from Kilgrave when she needed him to get where she wanted to be?

The bathroom door opened and Kilgrave switched the light on, bathing them in harsh white light.

“So, Patsy.”

She looked at him through the mirror, standing behind her. “You’re manipulating her.”

“Pot, kettle. All this talk of setting boundaries. I told you not to interfere with our relationship. Have you thought about it?”

“Thought about what?”

“You know what.”

Her skin prickled again. She felt uneasy with her back to him and turned around.

“Why? Why try to make me sleep with you? You hate me. The feeling’s mutual, by the way.”

“Hate you? I don’t hate you, Patsy. That would imply an intensity of feeling which I do not have.”

“Then why?”

He shrugged. “I’m curious to see how far Patsy Walker will go to get what she wants.”

“Did you play games like this with Jessica?”

He gave her a look. “No, because you’re not her. You need taking down a peg or two. Jessica never did. Her self-esteem is already down in the gutter; she isn’t vain like you.”

Taking down a peg or two… Was he worried about what she might do now that she knew they were sleeping together? She looked at him, the lines creasing his forehead, and wondered. He’d already warned her about not ruining their relationship. Which meant he saw her as a threat.

“This isn’t about me,” she realised. “This is you trying to regain control. You can’t use me as a bargaining chip against Jessica anymore and you’re afraid that she’s going to abandon you just like your parents did.”

“Don’t talk to me about my parents.”

“You’re scared. Deep down you’re still that scared little kid wanting to be loved. Kilgrave…” She was tempted to call him by his real name but he already looked like he might hit her. She took a breath, forcing herself to go on: “Jessica doesn’t love you and threatening me isn’t going to change that.”

His face darkened. He stepped forward, trapping her against the sink, and his hand reached for her waist. Trish slapped him away at once, breathing fast. Her heart was pounding.

“Touch me again and I’ll call for Jessica.”

“What’s Jessica going to think if she sees us in here, hmm? Having our secret tryst.”

Her hands scrabbled for the edge of the basin, bracing herself. He hadn’t moved; she couldn’t move an inch without bumping into him.

“She’ll think you’re assaulting me,” said Trish, fighting to stay calm, “because that’s what you do. She’ll believe me and she’ll hate you.”

There was a pause, Kilgrave regarding her with a calculating look. Then he stepped back. “Answer the question, Patsy. Or Jessica will come looking for us and then we’ll be in real trouble.”

“How do I know this isn’t a game? How do I know you’re not making it all up so you can have your fun and leave me with nothing?”

“You don’t trust me?” She gave him a dubious look and he relented. “All right, fair shout. I’ll show you proof that Karl Malus is alive and well and I know where to find him. If you want his help, you know what to do. What do you say?”

Her heart was pounding again. She didn’t want to commit so quickly. Not if there was another way around this. Some way she could track down Malus herself.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Clock’s ticking, Patsy. He won’t be around for long.”

He departed and she sagged, the hard edge of the basin digging into her lower back. He intended to kill Malus. Of course he did. That was how he’d dealt with everyone at IGH. If she accepted his deal, she’d be accepting that too. Then again, if she didn’t then he’d kill Malus anyway. Her involvement wouldn’t make any difference and Malus was hardly innocent.

She returned to the table a couple of minutes after Kilgrave, joining them for dessert. An awkward silence descended. Jessica stared down at the remains of her cheesecake. And she didn’t even want to look at Kilgrave.

When she could bear the atmosphere no longer, she cleared her throat. “Jess, can I ask a favour?”

Jessica looked up, eyebrows drawing together. “What?”

“I’m working on a story about the Midland Circle collapse. It’s been hard to get anyone to talk about it. I wondered if I could… borrow Kilgrave while I investigate.”

“Borrow Kilgrave?”

Technically it wouldn't be the first time she'd done this. Using Kilgrave's powers for her own gain, getting reluctant witnesses to talk. Easy scoop. But Jessica had always been there before. This time she wanted to work with him on her own. Jessica looked suspicious, Kilgrave's expression carefully blank. He knew what she was asking for.

"I could take him with me to work tomorrow. Give you a break, if you want. I know you had a hard time last month."

That was as strongly as she dared put it. If she said outright that she wanted to take Kilgrave off Jessica's hands because their relationship had become too toxic, she wasn't sure how Jessica would take it.

"I really enjoy it when you two make decisions about me like I'm not here," said Kilgrave. "Really puts me in my place."

The two women ignored him.

"I shouldn't leave you with him," Jessica said.

"I know. I'm prepared to deal with him." Knife in her bag. Pepper spray. She had no illusions about how dangerous Kilgrave was, and Jessica knew how hard she'd trained in the past year. "Like I said… you don't have to do this alone."

For the first time, the barest flicker of a smile passed across Jessica's face, like the first chink of sunlight after a heavy storm. "I guess I could use some me time. If you make me regret this," she added to Kilgrave, "I'll make you regret it harder."

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "You know me. Always happy to help."

"That was very well done," Kilgrave said the next morning. "Jessica really does trust you. More fool her."

Her stomach flipped but she ignored it, stopping off at the office to check in so it looked like she was working. She grabbed a briefcase with her notes and tried not to worry as Kilgrave gave directions to their driver for the day.

There was no harm in seeing his proof. She hadn't committed to his deal yet, and if she could track down Doctor Malus without having to meet Kilgrave's insane demand, this whole thing could turn out a lot better than anticipated.

He could also kidnap her. That was always a risk. But she held her nerve, and forty five minutes later found her curiosity piqued when they arrived at Metro-General Hospital.

"Does Malus work here?"

"You'll see," Kilgrave replied.

She'd been here more than once, both as patient and visitor, and the reception area was familiar to her, Trish looking around with nervous excitement. Surely Malus couldn't be here right under their noses.

Kilgrave got out his phone and sent a message, then beckoned her to follow him. Up a set of stairs, along several corridors and into a closed-off ward for cardiac patients. A nurse spotted them and came over to ask what they were doing but Kilgrave brushed her off. One woman visiting a patient looked up and clearly recognised her, eyes widening, but left them alone.

That was the drawback of having a well-known face. She wasn't splashed on billboards across the city anymore, but she'd been around long enough that a lot of people still knew who she was.

On the other side of the ward, a young woman in a white coat looked over and saw them, and at first Trish thought that this woman recognised her too. She realised her mistake when the young woman made an excuse to the colleague standing next to her and hurried over, her eyes fixed on Kilgrave.

"Adelaide," he greeted her, pulling her in for an impromptu hug and kiss on the cheek, and Trish didn't know how she felt about that but Kilgrave was already moving them along, Adelaide pointing them to an empty office where they could sit down and talk.

She was very young, Trish thought, a junior doctor or trainee perhaps. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail and she was wearing plain black pants and a cotton top as well as the white coat that mostly hid her figure, but there was no doubt that she was very pretty. Her dark eyes were wide, hands fiddling with a loose thread on her sleeve.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Everything's fine," Kilgrave reassured her. "Trish, meet Adelaide. Adelaide, meet Trish. We won't keep you long. Trish here wants to know about our friend Doctor Karl Malus. Why don't you tell her?"

"Wait," Trish said. "This is your proof? This girl?"

"Yes," said Kilgrave. "Adelaide, tell her—"

"Wait!" She held up her hand. "Don't tell her what to do. I want to hear from her without you putting words in her mouth. Let me talk to her alone."

There was something intoxicating about giving Kilgrave orders. He so rarely obeyed them, but in those early weeks with Jessica he'd had no choice and she'd delighted in seeing him abject, sulkily following Jessica around like a muzzled dog.

As before, resentment flashed in Kilgrave's eyes but he glanced at the girl and then shrugged, standing up.

"Five minutes," he said. "Then she gets back to work."

That was an order. So he'd given her a timer but she could work with that. Kilgrave departed and she turned back to the girl, offering a reassuring smile. The office was small and cramped, with a tiny barred window that didn't let in much light, and a large medicine cabinet behind the single desk dominating the room. Adelaide's hands were clasped in her lap and they were trembling. Was she nervous… or afraid?

"Listen," Trish said. "I won't let anything bad happen to you. I just want to ask a few questions."

“Why?”

“Do you know Karl Malus?”

The girl nodded, her eyes shifting from side to side. She looked like she’d rather be anywhere but here and Trish wondered if she should have let Kilgrave make her speak. His power was convenient…

“Doctor Malus performed illegal and inhumane experiments on innocent people, including a friend of mine. I want to find him so that we can bring him to justice. Can you help me do that?”

“Are you going to kill him?”

Trish hesitated. “We’re going to bring him to justice.”

“He’ll kill him. Kilgrave. He killed all the rest.”

“What do you mean?”

She watched the girl carefully, the way her mouth wobbled, the way she refused to meet Trish’s eyes. Adelaide seemed to struggle, her fingernails digging into her palms, and then she looked up, her gaze suddenly clear and distinct, eyes burning with defiance. In that moment she looked remarkably like Jessica.

“When he escaped from the Raft. He told me that he’d get revenge.”

“Why would he tell you that?”

“We were both imprisoned there. That’s how we met.”

Trish paused, genuinely shocked. She’d wondered how this girl had been unlucky enough to encounter Kilgrave. Bit by bit, the full story came out:

Adelaide had been imprisoned on the Raft at the same time as Kilgrave, though she had no reason to be there. She wasn’t a convict, nor was she gifted. Instead she had been kidnapped and trapped in an underwater prison against her will. Her cellmate had been Kilgrave, and her kidnappers were IGH, the company that Karl Malus worked for and that had performed illegal experiments on Kilgrave during his time in prison. One of those experiments had involved trapping other prisoners in the cell with him in order to test the limits of his mind control. Trish knew that much. But the only prisoners she had heard about had been men. He’d never told them about a girl being imprisoned with him. Never said anything about IGH kidnapping anyone either.

“Why?” she asked. “Why you?”

It was like feeding a mouse to a snake. She would have been utterly defenceless.

“Because… Because I look like her.”

Trish drew in a sharp breath. She didn’t mean…

“Like Jessica?”

The girl nodded.

“When I left the prison, I was pregnant,” Adelaide whispered, confirming Trish’s worst fears. “Doctor Malus offered me a deal. He — he said that his company would pay me twenty thousand dollars for the foetus I was carrying. All I had to do was sign a nondisclosure agreement and go back to my life like nothing had happened.”

Trish licked her lips. This poor girl. How long had she suffered in that cell for? What the hell had IGH planned to do with her aborted child?

“Did you sign it?”

Adelaide nodded. Her lips were pressed together, shoulders tense. “But I didn’t get what I was owed. After Kilgrave escaped, Doctor Malus contacted me. He said he was sorry for everything they’d done to me, and that I should run away. He said he was going to Peru. He offered to take me with him.”

“But you said no?”

Another nod. “I couldn’t leave my family. My mom, my brothers… I’d take the risk if I had to, and I’d make the same choice again even knowing that Kilgrave did find me. We’re better off financially so, you know, it hasn’t been a total horror show.”

“God, I’m sorry.”

Adelaide gave a tight smile. “I wish none of it had happened, but I had to move on somehow.”

Trish nodded sympathetically. As much as she wished that she had never heard this story, she was beginning to understand why Kilgrave had brought her here. This was his lead. He must have used Adelaide to track down Malus.

“Adelaide… I need to know. Karl Malus, is he still in Peru?”

That would be one hell of a journey. She hadn’t thought about what distances they might have to travel to find Malus. She’d assumed with Kilgrave’s hints that he must be somewhere close by, but maybe not.

“I don’t know.” The girl fidgeted in her seat, looking at her watch. “I should go. I said I was going to the bathroom, but I need to get back to work…”

She had more questions. She was sure there were more questions to ask, but Kilgrave’s ultimatum loomed in her thoughts again, blocking out everything else.

“Okay,” she said, standing up. She grabbed a pen and notepad from the desk and scribbled her phone number on it before offering it to Adelaide. “If you need someone to talk to. Jessica and I… Well, I can’t say we know exactly what you’ve been through but we know more than most. Stay away from Kilgrave. You’re better off without him.”

Adelaide frowned. “You say that like I have a choice.”

There was no response to that. But Adelaide took the slip of paper and Trish let her walk away. She couldn’t fix the past. The future, however…

Kilgrave was waiting for her outside the ward. She marched up to him, eyes blazing with righteous fury.

“You are not to go near that girl again, do you understand me?”

He blinked. “What? Why?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know why.”

He started walking, rolling his eyes, but Trish didn’t intend to let this one go.

“I helped her,” he said before she could open her mouth. “Did she tell you that?”

“What do you mean, you helped her?”

“Addy is a medical student,” Kilgrave explained. “She needed the money that IGH offered her to pay off her student loans. Unfortunately IGH went under before they had paid more than a quarter of what she was owed. I stepped in to help. I paid off all her fees, cleared the family debt, and once she passes her exams, I’ll help her find somewhere to live.”

Of all the outlandish things she had heard in the last ten minutes, this was by far the most unbelievable. Trish stared at him.

“Why would you do that?”

“It’s not her fault she got into this mess. IGH kidnapped her and imprisoned her for months, and then they took our unborn child and bought her off for a measly twenty thousand dollars. Addy was good to me. The least I can do is repay her.”

It was bullshit. It had to be. Even if it wasn’t, the idea that he thought he could repay the girl in any way after what he’d done filled her with revulsion.

“You’re pulling the same dirty trick on her that you did with Jessica. Giving her money, finding her a place to live—”

“Oh, what a crime! Helping a person in need, send me to the dogs.”

“You’re not helping her, you’re controlling her. She said it herself; you didn’t give her a choice.”

“That didn’t matter to you when my mind control helped you, did it?” They were starting to attract strange looks from other visitors to the ward. Kilgrave glanced around. “Nothing to see here, move along.”

He moved them on too, Trish getting in an elevator with him, still fuming. How had he gotten to Adelaide in the first place? He shouldn’t have been able to go anywhere without Jessica supervising him.

“You still haven’t told me where Karl Malus is,” she said. “Adelaide’s story isn’t proof.”

“Well, I’m not going to give you his location, am I?” said Kilgrave. “Otherwise you’d go find him yourself. Addy gave me Karl’s last known phone number — deleted, by the way, so don’t bother going back to ask for it. I hired a private investigator to track him down. Not Jessica. One of her competitors. And he finally came up with the goods.”

“Does Jessica know about this?”

“Of course not.”

“God.” She folded her arms, leaning back against the wall. “You’ve been playing us for fools. How long have you been sneaking off?”

“Jessica learned a long time ago that she couldn’t stop me from going off whenever I wanted. You’re the idiot who still believed I was your prisoner. She’s not the fool, Patsy. You are.”

The elevator arrived at the first floor, the doors opening, and Trish’s mouth was dry. After witnessing Jessica and Kilgrave together, she had assumed that Kilgrave had manipulated Jessica somehow, gotten under her skin… but not to this extent.

They crossed the reception area, and her heart was beating so loudly it drowned out everything and everyone around her.

“Well, maybe Jessica has been compromised,” she said, and Kilgrave snorted. “But I haven’t. I won’t let you do whatever you want.”

“Really?” He glanced at her. “How?”

He was taunting her. He knew she was powerless. The only advantage she had was her immunity to his mind control. She didn’t have Jessica’s strength.

“I’m armed,” she said quietly. “Don’t think I won’t hurt you if I have to.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Threats already? You!” He caught the eye of a janitor passing through the waiting area. “Come here. If this woman takes one more step, strangle her to death.”

She froze. Kilgrave had already stepped away from her, out of reach. And the janitor abandoned his equipment to approach them, ready to act on Kilgrave’s command.

He could have her killed, just like that. Any public place was his own personal fortress, the unsuspecting populace his loyal minions.

Kilgrave folded his arms. “Say you’re sorry.”

He wasn’t going to stop, she thought. He’d been so used to getting his own way for so long, and Jessica had failed to do her job. She’d let him escape the boundaries of his so-called prison and track down one of his previous victims with no repercussions. If Trish was going to be a hero, she’d have to step up to the plate.

“I’ll accept your deal,” she said, catching him by surprise. “If you agree that you’ll never bother Adelaide again. Leave her alone. Then you can do whatever you want with me for one night, and you take me to Malus and you make him perform the same operation on me that he performed on Jessica. And let this man go too.”

She trembled as she said it. She was taking a huge risk on several levels: trusting that Kilgrave would stick to his word, that he really did know how to find Doctor Malus, that Malus would be able to give her abilities that would allow her to do what she’d always dreamed of, to break free of the media circus, of her mother’s control, Kilgrave’s influence… to be a hero.

But no risk, no reward, right?

And looking at Kilgrave, she thought that he was making the same calculation. After all, this was a risk for him too. If she gained the ability to curb stomp him… Well, she wasn't Jessica. She wouldn't hesitate to put him down.

"All right," said Kilgrave after a moment. 'Glad you've come around, Patsy. Get back to work,' he added to the janitor. "No harm done."

Kilgrave held his arm out to her and she took a deep, shaky breath.

She was all in.

3. Patsy Goes Cray-Cray

The time was 17.48. He'd told her to meet him at this hotel and to wear something classy, which managed to be insulting (when *wasn't* she classy?) and terrifying all at once. Was he going to treat this like an actual affair? He hadn't said. But she'd gone for a little black dress and pinned her hair back. When in doubt, play it safe.

Kilgrave was waiting for her in the reception area and strangely he was looking less sharply dressed than usual, wearing nondescript dark grey pants and a plain suit jacket. Not unprofessional — rather, the boring kind of professional. If he wanted to look like a middle manager, he was doing all the right things.

"So," he said, looking her up and down. "You know the rules."

She nodded.

He'd promised that he wouldn't cause any permanent physical damage or make her hurt anyone else. Other than that, he could do whatever he wanted.

"Come with me," he said.

He took her up to his room and she said, "What, aren't you going to take me for dinner first?"

He didn't answer, instead placing a hand on her lower back and ushering her through the door. Somehow this coldness was even more unnerving. Kilgrave wasn't usually quiet.

Her eyes went to the bed first, where there was a small pile of what she thought were clothes until she moved closer.

"Put those on," Kilgrave instructed her.

It was a wig, a red long-haired wig. And a pair of oversized sunglasses, the kind that celebrities wore to avoid being recognised by the tabloids. Trish swallowed.

"You want me to dress up like Patsy."

Patsy was a redhead. Patsy was sweet and simpering and your best friend and everything she'd left behind from her days of being a child star.

"I want you to do as you're told."

He was watching her, hands clasped behind his back, and she felt the chill of his gaze more acutely than ever. This was humiliating. But she put on the wig as she'd done so many times before and Kilgrave laid a hand on her shoulder as she checked her reflection in the mirror.

"Just like old times."

"I'm a different person now."

But she didn't quite feel it just then. How often had she stayed in anonymous rooms like this one, travelling from state to state on tour or for her next acting gig? She'd always felt

displaced. There was nothing to ground her here, none of her belongings, only the smell of fresh sheets and the obligatory chocolate on the clean white pillow. The face that looked back at her was older, the cheekbones more prominent, but Patsy was the girl hiding under the red hair and bangs, with a shadow at her shoulder in the form of an overbearing taskmaster who controlled her every word and move—

"You're always Patsy to me," he said, and she felt physically sick.

She clutched her side and moved to the desk opposite the bed to find something to lean on. A black duffle bag had been placed on the table top but the moment Kilgrave saw where she was going, he grabbed her shoulder again, pulling her back.

"That's my stuff. Don't touch it."

He picked up the sunglasses for her and Trish put them on, feeling some sense of security hiding behind them. She chanced a half-glance at the duffle bag. What was in there? Then Kilgrave pointed to a rucksack on the floor by the bed that she hadn't noticed before.

"Pick that up. You can leave your things here."

Now confused as well as scared, she did as she was told, finding the rucksack surprisingly heavy. It was the kind of backpack one might wear for hiking, sturdy and waterproof. Something in it sloshed about, a liquid container of some sort — maybe a water bottle.

A bag for him and a bag for her. Why?

"What am I carrying?" she asked. "I thought we — are we going somewhere?"

Kilgrave put on a pair of sunglasses too. She'd missed where he'd gotten them from, but she didn't miss his triumphant grin.

"That's right, Patsy. We're going out."

The high-rise building that housed her old recording studio wasn't as good as the one she worked in now, she thought. Less modern, dirtier, and the show they'd replaced her with was getting worse ratings.

"We have an appointment," Kilgrave said to the man at the reception desk. "Let us through."

He buzzed them in and she entered the main lobby with a sense of déjà vu. She used to come through these doors every morning. Drink coffee, check in with the producer, go over the file of whatever guest she was interviewing that day…

And Kilgrave had decided to bring her back here. The same question kept buzzing around her mind: why? He'd been quiet during the car ride. Distracted, she thought, drumming his fingers on his knee, looking out of the window and into the distance.

Now he moved with a sense of purpose, glancing around at the couple of other people moving through the lobby before he brought her over to the vending machine where he pretended to browse the hot drinks. He'd held her arm this entire time.

“Kilgrave,” she said in a low voice when she was sure that no one else was close enough to hear, “what are we doing here?”

“How do you feel about your old place of work?” he asked.

“I…”

“I remember you were eager to leave. Said some nasty things about your old producer too. Seemed like you were glad to be shot of the place.”

“I was ready to move on.”

There was that same poster on the notice board advertising meditation classes. No one had bothered to take it down. Community theatre, live music, a health and safety notice… They were living in the last century. Her new office had television screens.

“They treated you badly. You said so yourself.” He looked at her, and her stomach dropped. “I say it’s high time you got your revenge. Burn the place down.”

For a moment she couldn’t speak. The world seemed to tilt and spin around her, as if the whole universe and not just Kilgrave were trying to send her off-balance.

“What did you say?” she managed.

“You heard me. Burn the place down. You have everything you need in there,” he added, indicating the rucksack. “Find somewhere quiet, light it up and meet me outside.”

Her heart thundered in her chest. She remembered other burning buildings, the acrid scent of smoke… The time he’d forced her to blow up her own apartment. She’d only escaped because Jessica had grabbed her and leapt to safety. Last year they’d broken into IGH headquarters and he’d ordered Luke Cage to burn the lab down, to wipe out any trace of their experiments. She remembered the smell, the way the soot got into her lungs, the taste of the ash in her throat…

“You can’t.” She was Trish again. “Kilgrave, that’s not what we agreed, you promised you wouldn’t order me to hurt anyone!”

His eyes glittered. “I haven’t. The fire alarm will go off; there’ll be plenty of time to escape. I’m telling you to destroy a building, that’s all. No one has to get hurt.”

That was a lie and he knew it. He knew there was a risk. It was after six, so later than normal office hours for most workers, but not for WNEX. They were still on-air and while the number of staff in the building would be lower than, say, mid-afternoon, they would still have to evacuate a significant number of people.

“What if someone gets trapped by the fire? What if not everyone escapes?”

He shrugged.

He didn’t care. Obviously. He was playing some kind of sick game and in Kilgrave’s world that meant toying with people’s lives as if they were plastic dolls to be tossed out on a whim. Was this how Jessica had felt when she’d tried to manage Kilgrave’s destructive impulses? But Jessica had her super strength — she could have stopped him at any time — Trish had never understood why Jessica hadn’t stopped him sooner…

When she didn't move, Kilgrave grabbed her hand, dragging her away from the vending machine and to the nearby elevator.

"We have a deal," he reminded her.

"You're sick! This is what gets you off? Sorry to disappoint you but I'm not going to hurt anyone. You made Jessica into a murderer but I won't let you do the same thing to me."

"Then you won't get to see Karl."

She bit her lip. He noticed.

"Do it," he said. "Then ask yourself who's really sick — the man giving the order, or the woman burning down her old place of work out of envy and spite and ambition."

"That's not—"

He twisted her wrist and she stopped, choking back a cry.

"Do it. I'll give you ten minutes. Meet me outside when you're done."

And he strode away, leaving Trish with angry tears in her eyes behind the sunglasses, nursing her aching wrist. He hadn't broken anything, but it was tender. *No permanent damage*, he'd said. That wasn't a promise. It was a warning. Behind her, the elevator door opened and a man stepped out, hurrying past her without a glance.

Kilgrave was leaving it to her. Her choice.

Trish stepped inside the elevator and hit the button on autopilot before sagging against the wall.

Was this how he had gotten to Jessica? Giving her just enough rope to hang herself with. To make her think that it was her own fault, blaming herself for situations that Kilgrave had put her in.

Well, she wasn't going to make that mistake. This was Kilgrave's game and if anyone got hurt tonight, that was on him. She was smarter than he was. She'd find a way to do what he wanted without causing harm.

He'd mentioned the fire alarm and that gave her an idea. She'd hit it before she started any fire, to give people a chance to escape. Then find out what was in the rucksack, do what she had to do, and get out fast.

Five minutes later Trish huddled inside a bathroom stall with the fire alarm blaring in her ears and unzipped the rucksack to examine its contents. She found: a carton of gasoline, a cigarette lighter, black leather gloves, a skin-tight black cat suit and a black cat mask complete with cat ears, the sort one might wear for a Halloween party. Like he'd said. Everything she needed to burn the place down.

What she really wanted to do was rip off this fucking wig and ignore the stupid cat mask. He shouldn't get to dress her up. But the Patsy disguise had gotten her this far and she couldn't let her face be seen.

An unrecognisable figure greeted her when she stepped out of the bathroom stall and caught sight of her reflection. Her character tonight was a red-haired cat burglar holding a

carton of gasoline: a cartoon of a woman. The combination of mask plus wig made her face itch. She poured the gasoline around the bathroom, dropped the carton, flicked the lighter on and tossed it at the carton.

The gas caught fire immediately and the spread was dramatic. Trish turned on her heel and ran.

Miraculously, she didn't break anything. She joined the few stragglers exiting the lobby and while she got a couple of strange looks, no one stopped her. Outside, people were milling around, bored. They hadn't realised that the fire was real and not a drill yet.

Trish stopped short, breathing hard, and felt a thrill of exultation. God, her heart was pumping. She looked around for Kilgrave. One of the men waiting outside — Bill, she recognised with a shock, her ex-producer — looked at his phone and shook his head.

"We're losing airtime. Can't they turn it off quicker?"

He started to head back to the building accompanied by one of his colleagues, and Trish stepped in front of him. "Stay away! This isn't a drill, that place is on fire and if you go in you're putting yourself at risk."

She was aware of the cat mask covering half her face, the mane of red hair — only her jaw was visible and she hoped he wouldn't recognise it, or her voice. Bill frowned, staring at her in confusion.

"I don't see any…" He trailed off, looking up.

Trish looked too as the first signs of smoke drifted out of one of the windows and people started to panic. She backed off, and the horn of a nearby car caught her attention. Kilgrave waved at her.

"Get in!"

So she did, leaving her bewildered ex-colleagues, the flicker and crackle of flames high up on the upper floors, and the trail of smoke behind. She jumped in the back of the car with Kilgrave, he yelled, "Drive!" and they got away even before sirens wailed in the distance.

"Oh, God," she said shakily.

She pulled off the wig and cat mask and wiped the sweat from her brow. She'd done it. She'd… Well, she'd committed a crime. She couldn't ignore that.

"Nice work," said Kilgrave. "I wasn't sure you'd do it. Greed is one hell of a drug."

"You could have given me a scarf."

"I thought you'd like the mask. Haven't you always wanted your own superhero costume?"

"I'm not a hero yet."

"You're not wrong there. Look what you did."

He showed her the news on his phone. Live pictures were already appearing on social media. In the few minutes since they'd left, the entire building was ablaze.

"You did that." He laid his hand on her thigh and she tried not to shudder. "That's power. Think of what you could do with some real ability."

"I don't want to do that. I want to save people, not put them in danger."

"Do you want to know a secret?" He leaned in, his breath tickling her ear. She felt rather than saw him smile. "It feels the same. That rush you get from saving someone, that thrill in your body, being in control. You can get it hurting people too. I'm feeling it right now."

His words were poison. She shouldn't listen. She held her breath, looking away. She was acutely aware of his hand caressing her thigh, heat transferring from his skin to hers.

"Tell me, Patsy. Why do you want to be gifted like me? Like Jessica?"

She tried to ignore what he was doing. But if she did that, she couldn't ignore what he was saying. The interior of the car was hot, stifling; there was nothing else to distract her beyond the traffic outside and that was mundane, the stuff of everyday. She'd done something decidedly unheroic, it was true, but she'd dealt with it in the best possible way. No one was hurt. Her goal hadn't changed.

"I want to help people who can't help themselves."

Her voice caught and she pressed her lips together. He'd asked her this question before, hadn't he? She was sure of it. It had been—

He slapped her.

It was a full, stinging slap on the cheek and it made her gasp in pain and indignation, jerking back in her seat. Their driver took no notice. He'd been ordered to take them back to the hotel and he would fulfil that order without question.

"Liar," said Kilgrave. "Tell the truth, Patsy. How do you want to *feel*?"

"You know," she gasped, cowering and hating herself for it. "I told you about — my mother…"

He made a face. "Now there's a mood killer. They mess you up, your parents, don't they? Jessica's messed her up by dying. Mine — well. You know."

"That's not an excuse."

"Not an excuse for what?"

"To be like you. To do the things you've done. I want to—"

She stopped but he caught on. "You want to what?"

"I want to stop all the shitty men like you. And the women like my mother. Anyone who thinks they have a right to manipulate or hurt someone else, I'll stop them and I'll feel good about it."

"Ah," he said. "But not tonight."

Fear lanced through her, and with it a different kind of worry — a thread of doubt. “If you know that’s what I want, why would you help me? Is this a trick?”

“Bit late to ask that now.”

He was looking ahead as he spoke and she followed his gaze, realising that they’d arrived back at the hotel. The car pulled up outside the lobby.

“No,” she said. “Come on — I want to know. I want an explanation.”

“You won’t hurt me,” he said, “because I mean too much to Jessica. It’s the same reason I won’t hurt you. Now get out of the car.”

Her cheek still throbbed where he’d hit her, and a glance at the rear view mirror confirmed that he’d left a mark. But she knew what he meant. Perhaps there were lines even Kilgrave wouldn’t cross — and Jessica had made it clear many times that harming Trish would be unforgivable. If he believed that and he believed that she thought the same way… Maybe he was arrogant enough to think that he’d be safe.

Well, more fool him. She stuffed the wig and mask in her rucksack and got out of the car. Kilgrave made her wear his suit jacket to hide the fact that she was wearing a cat suit. On her it looked like an oversized blazer.

The hotel staff took no notice.

He switched on the TV in the hotel room so they had the entertainment of a live report on the blaze in downtown Manhattan.

He wouldn’t let her change so instead she listened to the news while Kilgrave ordered room service. Three people were in hospital, the reporter said, and it wasn’t clear how badly injured they were but none were thought to be life threatening.

Three people. That’s not so bad.

If it was the worst thing she did tonight, she could live with that.

“We got on when we first met,” said Kilgrave. “Do you remember?”

He’d ordered nachos and dips. They sat on the bed sharing them together, a strangely friendly scene. Sometimes it was easy to forget what Kilgrave had done. What he was about to do.

She shook her head.

“When we first met, I was vulnerable to your mind control and I didn’t know what a jackass you were. We didn’t get on.”

“Why are you so hostile?”

She gave him a disbelieving look.

“Seriously,” he said. “I’ve gone above and beyond giving you the life that you want. I’m about to make you a hero. A little appreciation wouldn’t go amiss.”

“I don’t see why I should do that.”

“Look,” he said. “I’ll be honest with you. I have a… personal reason for asking you here tonight.”

She was intrigued despite herself. “Personal?”

“I’d like your help with Jessica.” Her face must have closed off because he leaned forward. “No, hear me out. Jessica is… You know she can be difficult. I love her but it’s hard to get through to her, especially when it comes to admitting her feelings. Sometimes I think she’d prefer not to have any. I think we can help her.”

“How?”

“Encourage her to live a little. Not out of the bottle. She doesn’t put herself out there.”

“I’ve tried. I wanted her to use her abilities for good—”

“But not for fun,” he interrupted her. “You tried to mould her into something she isn’t and she’s miserable for it.”

“I don’t think that’s why she’s miserable.”

It was the most diplomatic answer she could give. Did he honestly not think that he was the cause of Jessica’s misery?

Kilgrave held up his hand. He had her cell phone, which he’d taken off her as soon as she’d arrived. It was buzzing, the screen lit up.

“Speak of the devil.”

Her eyes widened. “Jessica? But I told her we’d be working late…”

She’d used the Midland Circle story as an excuse for working with Kilgrave again. It had proven to be a fruitful cover story because no one had any idea what had happened, or if they did, they weren’t telling.

“Answer it,” he said. “Tell her that you set off the fire at WNEX.”

“I can’t—”

But he’d already hit the answer button before handing the phone over. She took it, her nerves jangling. *Think fast.*

“Trish, where are you?”

“Jess — hey. I’m at home. Why, is something wrong?”

“Yeah, something’s wrong. Something is very wrong because I’m in your apartment right now and *you’re not here*.”

Oh. Shit. Jessica sounded *pissed*. One lie and she’d been found out immediately. She licked her lips.

“Right, I can explain…”

“Is Kilgrave with you?”

She glanced over at Kilgrave who was listening attentively. He shrugged. No help there.

“No. I thought he went home.”

“Nope. That’s why I called. Where the hell are you, Trish? What’s going on?”

“I… Did you see the news tonight? About the fire at my old radio station?”

“Fire?”

She could imagine Jessica’s eyebrows raising, Jessica going through her phone to find the news. And she could see Kilgrave’s eyes on her, dark, expectant. If she disobeyed he’d say she’d broken her part of the deal and this would all be for nothing.

She took a breath.

“Yeah, so… I started it.”

There was a pause.

“What?”

“It was me. I started the fire.”

“Trish… You’re scaring me. Quit the bullshit and just tell me where you are.”

She couldn’t quite place the panicked note in Jessica’s voice until suddenly it hit her. Back when she had been vulnerable to Kilgrave’s mind control, Jessica had spoken to her in similar tones.

She was scared that Trish was being controlled again.

Well, maybe she could work with that.

“You’re right, I’m with Kilgrave,” Trish said, the words spilling out of her in a rush. “We’re at a hotel—”

She knew she’d pay for that and she did: Kilgrave hissed out an annoyed growl between his teeth and snatched the phone from her, ending the call.

“That’s not what I told you to do.”

“You didn’t tell me not to do it either,” she retorted, and he stared at her, breathing hard.

She stared back. The tension felt like a taut thread ready to snap.

“Right,” he said, pointing to the floor. “Get on your knees.”

She hesitated.

“*Now*.”

She obeyed.

He stood up and approached her. She stared up at him and wondered if he’d done this with Jessica. Surely not like this. With other women, then. She was different from them. She was doing this because she’d chosen to, because they had an arrangement. She was fulfilling a contract, nothing more, nothing less.

“Patsy the slut. This isn’t the first time you’ve put out to get ahead, is it? You started a long time ago.”

Her mouth twisted. She wished she could say that he was wrong, but… Kilgrave knew. He knew everything.

“Go on then,” he said. “You know what to do.”

It happened back when she was under his control.

“Tell me,” he said. “Why does Jessica have such a hard-on for you?”

The crudeness of the question made her pause. “We helped each other to survive my mother.”

They were in her apartment at the time and he was making plans to blow it up. Kilgrave could be restless but she’d never seen him so on edge. He made her sit down in her own living room and tell him the full story.

How her mother had micromanaged her career. Trained her to become Patsy. Controlled every aspect of her life, from the food she ate to the clothes she wore.

“Jess protected me. She made my mom back off until we were old enough to get out.”

“You told her everything.”

“I…” She faltered. She couldn’t agree with that statement.

“You didn’t tell her everything?”

“Not at first. It took a while to trust each other.”

“Yeah, she’s a hard one to trust. What didn’t you tell her?”

He’d compelled her to tell the truth. So she told him about the director. Her face burned with shame and her voice shook, but she told him.

“I see,” he said when she’d finished. “The dark side of show business, eh. If you hate it so much, why are you still in it?”

“Because I want my voice to be heard. I want to make a difference. I didn’t have to sleep around to get where I am now. I earned it.”

“But you used the Patsy brand, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’re cheap.”

He said it, and that made it true. She felt it like a sickness in her bones. She was cheap and nasty and worthless. She’d whored herself out, taken every last scrap of cash she could wring out of the Patsy brand. Her mother had said the same.

“Is there anything going on in that shallow, selfish head of yours?” he went on. “You’re on a vapid talk show. How is that making a difference?”

“I want to do more,” she said. “I want to talk about the news, about real issues that are affecting people’s lives. I want to help people.”

She stopped, but Kilgrave sensed that she was holding back.

“Go on.”

“I want to be like Jessica. If I had gifts like hers, I could be a superhero. I’d do it in a heartbeat.”

“Patsy the hero.” He looked her up and down. “I’d watch that. Well, you’re in luck. Today is your chance to help someone. Now listen carefully…”

This is a performance, she told herself. *He’s the director. All I have to do is follow his lead.*

He was right: she’d done this before. It was degrading and humiliating but she had the chance to achieve a dream she hadn’t thought would be possible. It had to be worth it.

“Bend over, Patsy.”

Not once did he focus on her pleasure. It was that more than anything that made her feel used. She’d felt like this before, years ago, and she hadn’t understood back then why those hands on her body made her feel dirty and tainted, like *she’d* done something wrong.

“That’s enough,” she said when he’d finally finished and rolled over next to her on the bed.

She was hot and sweaty and sore. She sat up, ready to swing her legs over the side of the bed and take a cold shower, but Kilgrave’s hand gripped her arm.

“I didn’t say you could leave. I have you all night, remember.”

She pulled the sheets up to cover herself instead. “What if Jessica comes looking for us?”

She knew they were in a hotel, and this was one that Kilgrave had used before. He had habits; Jessica knew them all. Honestly, she’d hoped that Jessica might find them sooner.

“Then we’ll deal with her. What I want is your full support with me and Jessica. Understood?”

He was getting dressed as they spoke, pulling on his pants.

“No…” She couldn’t think clearly. “How do I do that?”

“I want you to be my and Jessica’s biggest fan. Stop undermining our relationship. Start encouraging the idea of us together.”

“She’s going to find that suspicious.”

“Then find a way to do it that isn’t suspicious. You must have at least two brain cells to rub together.”

“What is it with you insulting my intelligence? Are you insecure, is that it? You can’t stand that I’m a smart, powerful woman with a career and—”

“Patsy,” he said. “Do you really think I give two shits about your career? You’re giving yourself far too much credit. Put on some clothes.”

“Trish!”

Banging at the door. She jumped and so did Kilgrave, and then her heart leapt into her mouth because *that was Jessica*.

“Trish!”

“Shit!” Kilgrave hissed. “Get dressed, now! And tell her the truth — you came of your own free will, I’m not to blame—”

He had his shirt half-on and was hopping about trying to find his shoes, and then came another, louder thump at the door that was clearly a shoulder slam. Meanwhile Trish had scrambled up and gotten her underwear on, but the only thing left on the floor other than Kilgrave’s jacket was that stupid cat suit and there was no way she’d have time to—

His hand caught her wrist. “If you say anything about Malus I will have you fucking killed.”

The door burst open.

And it was Jessica, wild-haired and wilder-eyed, looking like she hadn’t slept for days, her face was so taut with pain and worry. She stopped short when she saw them and the devastation in her eyes was too much to bear.

Kilgrave’s grip tightened on her wrist. “Jessica, stop. This isn’t what you think.”

All the colour had drained from her face. “Let her go.”

“He isn’t controlling me!” said Trish. ‘Look, we can prove it.’ She looked at Kilgrave. “Give me an order.”

He understood. “Stand on one foot.”

It was a simple command, easily disobeyed. She didn’t move. Jessica had taken a couple more steps forward already, her eyes taking in the scene: the unmade bed, the clothes strewn on the floor, Kilgrave with his shirt hanging open and Trish in her underwear. It didn’t take a detective to work out what she’d interrupted.

“See,” said Trish as Jessica frowned, bewildered. “See, I’m not moving. He’s not in control.”

“Then what the hell am I looking at?”

“I’m sorry,” said Kilgrave. “I’m sorry, Jessica, this is not what I wanted—”

“Shut up! Trish, you told me. You said he was controlling you.”

“No, I didn’t.” She was trying to stay as calm as possible, even though her heart was racing, even though Kilgrave’s threat still echoed in her head. “Look, I owed Kilgrave a favour. This was his price.”

That was skirting the boundaries of the truth, but she was on thin ice whatever she said. Jessica was trembling, physically trembling. She could see it, and the wobble in her lip, her

fingers compulsively closing and opening.

“Is that true?”

She was looking at Kilgrave. It hurt — she hadn’t expected that, to see Jessica look to Kilgrave for confirmation of the truth rather than her.

“It’s true,” said Kilgrave.

Jessica looked like she might crumple. Trish didn’t know what to say. She wanted to shout that the fire wasn’t her fault, that Kilgrave had made her do it, but…

“So you go behind my back and, what, burn down a building and then jump into bed together? I’ve been betrayed by Kilgrave before but not like this. Not with you. And you, Trish—”

“I haven’t betrayed you,” Kilgrave interrupted.

“You slept with my best friend!”

“But we’re not together,” said Kilgrave. “As you’ve said yourself many times. Don’t deny that we’re in a relationship and then get jealous when I’m with someone else.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about? Making me jealous? Screw you.”

Trish was now feeling desperately like she’d been played — was Jessica right? Had this been Kilgrave’s motive all along? Everything he did was to get at Jessica, to manipulate Jessica… And judging by her reaction, he’d succeeded.

“What’s going on here?”

Trish blinked. Security had arrived — two men in uniform, presumably hotel security. Someone must have reported the break-in. Jessica whirled around but Kilgrave reacted first, pointing at her.

“Stop that woman!”

Like clockwork, they attacked. Jessica swore, meeting their charge head-on, and Trish was transfixed until Kilgrave grabbed her hand.

“Run!”

Jessica had thrown off one of the men — he hit the bed with a groan — but the other had grabbed her around the waist; they were struggling… Kilgrave yanked her hand and she followed helplessly, dashing past Jessica who called after her, out of the room and down the hallway in nothing but her underwear.

“Where are we going?” she gasped. If anyone saw them like this…

“Where else?” Kilgrave punched the button to call the elevator, darting a glance back at the hotel room. “We’re going to find Karl Malus.”

4. Hellcat

From the ashes of a burning skyscraper, a masked figure emerged from the WNEX New York radio station carrying a child in tow. Eyewitnesses described how she navigated the building with incredible agility, leaping up a collapsing staircase with catlike grace. Could this be a new superhero — no, superheroine — for these hellish times?

They boarded a plane. Not to Peru; Malus wasn't that far away. If their destination was any indication, he was in Chicago. The sky was clear and blue, the state of New York passing by thousands of feet below.

She'd survived her night with Kilgrave, but she was in his power now more than ever. Trish nudged the handbag under her seat surreptitiously with her foot. She had a knife hidden in there. It wouldn't have gotten past the airport metal detectors in ordinary circumstances, but travelling with Kilgrave wasn't ordinary. He'd ordered the hotel staff to retrieve all their luggage from the hotel room after Jessica had been dragged out and to deliver it to the airport, which of course they had. Now he had both their cell phones and a laptop which he'd brought along for no reason she could discern. Maybe the flight's selection of movies wasn't good enough for him.

She wondered what Jessica was doing now. Who would she blame for this mess? Kilgrave for setting them up? Or Trish for agreeing to his terms? If she found out why all of this was happening, would that change her mind? She didn't know. She ought to know Jessica better than that, but she didn't know.

She pressed her lips together, looking over at Kilgrave. "You threatened to kill me last night."

"Hmm?" He glanced up from his laptop. "I what?"

"And you want me to…" She tried to remember everything that had happened. It felt like a bad dream. "To encourage you and Jessica together."

"Well, we're having a bit of a spat right now. It'll pass."

"At least let me talk to her. Let her know I'm not dead."

"She knows you're not dead."

He said it with blithe certainty but as far as Trish knew Kilgrave hadn't spoken to Jessica since their escape. He'd switched their phones off to avoid contact. Maybe it was his way of punishing Jessica. Forcing her to admit that she had feelings for him.

She shook her head. "This was all about Jessica. You wanted us to get caught — to make her jealous."

"What did you think I wanted? You?"

There was a note of disgust in his voice. Had she even thought about his motives? No — not beyond the assumption that he wanted to have sex with her. She'd thought that was reason enough. Instead he'd used the whole thing to rile Jessica up, and…

"And the fire?" she asked. "Are you hoping I'll get arrested?"

"Oh, you do think I'm dastardly, don't you? No, I wasn't trying to get you arrested."

Since he'd given her a disguise. Well, then, she didn't know what he was up to. She was at a loss. "Then why?"

"Thought it would be fun."

"Are we really going to see Doctor Malus?"

"Yes. You're asking a lot of questions today. What's the matter?"

"Just hoping I'm not being kidnapped."

She had no way of knowing. She'd brushed that concern off in a rather blasé fashion before last night, but Kilgrave had already proven that this entire deal was far more than she had bargained for. In a sense she was being kidnapped either way. She didn't know where exactly he was taking her or what would happen next.

It wasn't a comforting thought.

Being on campus brought back memories. Full of open spaces, but itself enclosed from the rest of the city: a peaceful bubble. Trish glanced at the students walking by with their headphones and their cell phones, oblivious to the fact that a man with mind control powers was walking amongst them.

"There," said Kilgrave, pointing. "The lab."

It didn't look like much, just another brick and glass building. The dried-out grass around the campus was dying a death thanks to the summer heatwave, as parched as she was. They'd retrieved her black dress from the hotel along with her handbag, and in it she felt crumpled, uncomfortable and hot.

"Do you know what he's doing here?" she asked as they climbed the steps into the building.

"Teaching," said Kilgrave. "Quite the cosy arrangement from what I hear. He's got a ready supply of students to use as test subjects."

"Test subjects?"

"Once a mad scientist, always a mad scientist."

Kilgrave went up to the reception desk and ordered the man there to tell him where to find Doctor Millar. Karl was using an alias.

Seemed like everyone who escaped Kilgrave did that, she thought. He didn't just destroy lives, he uprooted them. She wondered if Jessica could do that. Run away, change her name,

start over.

And let him go free?

No. They couldn't in good conscience do that, not when they were the only two people in the world immune to his mind control. And if this worked… if Kilgrave kept his promise, if Malus gave her powers… Then there would be a reckoning.

"You're quiet," Kilgrave remarked. "Nervous?"

They climbed the stairs to the second floor where Doctor Millar's laboratory was supposed to be. She'd only seen offices and classrooms so far. No one stopped them. No security guards, barely any security at all beyond the locked door the receptionist had opened for them. Not that it would have made a difference.

"No," she said, which wasn't entirely true. "I just hope we didn't come all this way for nothing."

He said nothing to that. They'd reached the correct door. Kilgrave glanced at her, then pushed it open before stepping in.

Trish followed, looking around. The place reminded her irresistibly of the lab at IGH, though the two locations were hardly alike. This lab was cleaner, modern, with plenty of natural light shining through the windows. It was also more spacious, with several work counters each equipped with a microscope, set of petri dishes and other equipment: a working laboratory for multiple technicians.

Except there was only one technician and one workspace being used. A grey-haired man bent over a microscope: he had a trimmed white beard and square red-rimmed glasses. The T-shirt he wore beneath his lab coat looked rather wrinkled.

"Karl," said Kilgrave loudly. "It's been a while."

Malus jumped. He looked over and saw Kilgrave, and his expression deflated into resigned disappointment. Not surprise. Not even fear. Like he'd known this was coming.

"Kilgrave." Malus cleared his throat. "Come to finish me off?"

"Don't sound so eager about it. You're going to do something for us first. Trish." He gestured at her. "He's all yours."

Malus looked at her for the first time, frowning in mild puzzlement. He probably thought she was one of Kilgrave's floozies. Not that she cared what he thought. He was going to die soon anyway.

She cleared her throat, and to her surprise it was hard to find the right words.

"Doctor Malus, I'm here… I'm here because I need your help. A long time ago you performed an experiment on a teenage girl after she was pulled from a car wreck. You saved her life but you did something else too. You gave her powers."

"You're talking about Jessica Jones."

She nodded. "I want you to do the same thing for me."

The doctor made no judgement, simply nodding in understanding. “I can try.” He turned back to his microscope, removing the slide he had been looking at, then gestured at Kilgrave. ‘That man murdered all of my colleagues. Some of them were good people.’ He looked up. “If it makes any difference, I didn’t agree with their methods. We should never have involved innocent people.”

She thought of Adelaide, and anger soured her voice.

“Is that meant to be an apology?”

Kilgrave was leaning against a workbench, watching them. She was surprised he hadn’t said anything.

“If I need to say it again, then yes. I’m sorry.” Malus shrugged. “The operating room is this way. Follow me.”

Half an hour later she perched on the end of an operating table wearing a hospital gown and tucked her hair behind her ears while she watched Malus set up. She considered asking about the risks. Their chances of success. But no matter what the answer might be, it wouldn’t change her mind. She’d come too far now. She was doing this whatever the cost.

“How does this work?” she asked instead, more to fill the silence in the room than anything else.

A bright light shone down from the ceiling on to the operating table. He’d set up a machine that looked similar to one she’d seen at the IGH lab when she’d paid a visit and met Doctor Kozlov, Malus’ former colleague.

“This,” Malus said, pointing at the machine, “injects the fluid along your spine. If it works, it’ll trigger a reaction with your DNA, altering it.”

“What’s in the fluid?”

“I couldn’t replicate the formula we used back at IGH. But after the experiments we performed last year and the new stem cell sample I obtained… I think this should work. In theory. I should warn you that I’ve only tested it on rats and the results weren’t pretty. Are you sure you want to go ahead?”

She looked at Kilgrave, who again was watching them in silence, his arms folded. He didn’t look tense, exactly, but serious, attentive. She supposed he didn’t have any good memories of places like this.

“Thank you,” she said, catching him off-guard. “For giving me this chance.”

“You’re welcome.”

It might have been the first thing he’d said to her without a sneer in his voice. He didn’t deserve her thanks, not really; she’d paid for this moment with her body and the ashes of a burning building, but despite her doubts he had brought her to Malus and he had kept his end of the bargain. That was something.

Malus swabbed her arm and injected an anaesthetic. She took in a shaky breath.

"Will I be out for long?"

"Probably a day or so. It's hard to predict."

"Kilgrave." He raised his eyebrows at her. This was the last thing she would get to say before the operation, she thought; she was already feeling heavy. "Don't do anything you might regret."

He didn't answer, and as Malus instructed her to lie face down on the operating table and the world turned fuzzy, her last thought was: *how ironic.*

A second later, she woke.

Then she blinked, disoriented, because she wasn't where she had been before. She shifted, sitting up; she was in a hospital bed. A drip was attached to her arm. Trish looked around, and second-guessed her assessment: was this a private room? There were no other beds. Other than the heart monitor and other medical equipment by her bed, there was a wardrobe, a couple of chairs for visitors, and a picture of a yacht decorating an otherwise bland beige wall. The clock on the bedside table told her it was six minutes past nine in the morning. Next to it was a plain manila envelope, which she looked at in puzzlement for a moment before she remembered what had happened.

The operation. Whatever Malus had done, he'd done it, which meant…

She flexed her fingers, examining how they shone translucent pink bathed in the sunlight coming from the window. Had anything changed? She couldn't tell. She felt hungry and thirsty and a little tired, all of which was to be expected.

There was no guarantee that this experiment would give her any abilities at all. And if it did, no reason to expect that she'd get super strength or flight like Jessica, or mind control like Kilgrave. It could be anything.

She pulled the drip off her arm and got up. There was an en suite bathroom, which she used, and her black dress in the wardrobe, which she put on, wrinkling her nose. Her handbag had been tucked beneath one of the chairs and she rummaged through it, but her cell phone was still missing. Kilgrave hadn't returned it to her.

Speaking of…

Where was he? And Malus? She glanced at the door, then back at the envelope on the bedside table. And in the second that Trish hesitated, wondering what to do first, the door opened and Malus and Kilgrave came in followed by a woman carrying a breakfast tray.

"Morning," said Kilgrave, while Malus greeted her with a tired smile. "How is our sleeping beauty today?"

"Fine," she said, but Malus wanted to check her temperature anyway. "A little…"

He cocked his head. "A little what?"

"Buzzed."

It was the only word she could think of. She hadn't had any coffee yet, but she felt like she'd had a caffeine hit already. Maybe it was nerves. Maybe it was all in her head. Maybe something really was different.

The woman put down the breakfast tray and left, and Trish ate her scrambled eggs on toast with relish. Protein. She needed it.

Kilgrave sat down on one of the chairs as Malus pronounced that she was fine. She'd been unconscious for eighteen hours and she was dehydrated, but otherwise healthy.

"What have you been doing?" Trish asked Kilgrave. "Has Jessica been in touch?"

He ignored her, turning to Malus. "Did the experiment actually work?"

"I don't know," said Malus. "It might not be an obvious mutation."

"Then find out. Attack her."

He said it as casually as ordering breakfast. Her eyes widened as Malus lunged for her, and then everything happened with perfect clarity: she put the breakfast tray down on the bed, sprang up and dodged, then kicked Malus in the shin. He stumbled against the bed with a groan. The doctor was old, unfit; she'd trained to defend herself against men far stronger than him. Even so she surprised herself.

"Go Patsy!" Kilgrave applauded her, and she rolled her eyes. "Karl, don't give up. Throw a punch at her, she can take it."

"What kind of…" She dodged Malus again, easily. "…deranged test is this? Call him off!"

Malus threw a clumsy punch at her which she parried and to her dismay she wasn't any stronger, but she thrilled nonetheless at the change. Every instinct, every reflex, was on point. She'd never felt like this in any of her training. Movement, action, reaction: it was so much easier and far more fluid.

"Stop," said Kilgrave, and Malus' arms dropped limply to his side. "Congratulations, Patsy. At least, I assume congratulations are in order."

"Yeah, thanks," she said, wiping her brow. Internally she was punching the air. "You could have let me finish my breakfast."

"I've waited eighteen hours already. Come on, Karl. Let's go."

He got up, Malus still trying to catch his breath, and a wave of confusion hit her. What had he been waiting for? Why was Malus still alive? She'd gotten what she wanted and she had assumed that Kilgrave was here for revenge, so why did he care whether or not the experiment succeeded…?

"Wait," she said. "Where are you going?"

"You're free to go, Patsy. Don't make me change my mind."

But she couldn't let it go. More questions buzzed through her head and she was pumped up, adrenaline rushing through her veins.

"I'll come with you!"

She picked up her handbag, slinging it over her shoulder, and stepped forward to join them. Kilgrave turned around, annoyed, but it was Malus she had her eye on. The doctor was closer to her, trailing behind Kilgrave, and looking generally dishevelled. She doubted he'd had a good night.

Trish slipped her hand into her bag, then grabbed Malus in a chokehold and pointed a knife to his throat. Kilgrave stopped short as Malus yelped.

"I'll kill him," she said. "And if you try anything, I'll kill you. Just give me a reason."

She'd dreamt of this. Fantasies of stopping Kilgrave, saving Jessica, saving everyone. And now her dreams had come true.

She was gifted.

She could stop him.

Kilgrave held up his hands, backing off a step. "Patsy, don't be silly. Let him go and we'll talk."

She didn't budge. "What do you want with him?"

"Look, we both know you're not going to kill him."

"Really?" She nicked Malus' jaw with the tip of the blade and he flinched, a bead of blood pooling at the small cut. "I wouldn't be so sure."

Her guess had been right. Kilgrave hadn't killed Malus yet because he wanted him for something else and knowing Kilgrave that couldn't be anything good. Which meant he wanted Malus alive. Which meant she had leverage.

"Please," said Malus, his voice hoarse. "If you're going to kill me, just kill me. Make it quick."

"What does he want with you?" she asked.

"To repeat the ex—"

"Shut up!" Kilgrave barked, but she got it. She understood.

"You want the same thing I did," she realised. "You used me as a guinea pig. Did you think you could modify your powers and control us again, is that it? I won't let you."

Jessica had once told her that Kilgrave never did anything that didn't benefit him. It wasn't a bad mantra to go by. She'd wondered why he would give her the chance to gain superhuman abilities when he knew that she had it out for him. Here was the answer. Of course, he could have ordered Malus to test his new formula on any random person, but doing it with her gave him the added benefit of screwing over Jessica. Manipulation on multiple levels.

"Patsy." The look Kilgrave gave her was almost pitying. "You didn't open the envelope, did you?"

Their eyes went to the envelope at the same time, Trish half-turning to look at it. Kilgrave walked past her and picked it up, Malus watching them fearfully. She stayed where she was.

"What's in the envelope?"

He held her gaze. “Take a look.”

Was he trying to trick her? Make her let go of Malus? She shook her head and Kilgrave shrugged, opening it himself.

He pulled out a photograph.

A picture of her, Trish, topless, her hair spread out over the pillow, hands clutching at the sheets.

Everything turned white. She couldn’t see anything other than that image, could barely feel the knife she was holding, the tremor in her limbs a mixture of fear, horror and rage.

“You…”

How had he done it? The answer came to her as soon as the question: he’d either filmed or taken pictures of her during the night they’d spent together. That was why he’d wanted to spend the night with her. It was all a means of control.

“There’s more where that came from,” said Kilgrave, and there was a nasty gleam in his eyes. “I had a camera planted in the perfect spot. Have a look at your phone when I give it back to you. It’s all there. Fifty minutes of Patsy like you’ve never seen her before.”

She couldn’t speak. Her career would be torpedoed in a second. And even if it wasn’t, even if she carried on, she’d have to live with that material out there forever. *The duffle bag*, she thought. He’d placed it in full view of the bed. God, she was stupid.

“Oh, don’t worry, I haven’t shared it,” he went on, seeing the look on her face. “But…”

But he would if she didn’t do what he wanted. Men, power, control. It was a disease.

“No,” she said. The world was coming back into focus again, Malus’ shallow breathing, the smell of his sweat, the way he trembled against the knife at his throat. No — she couldn’t allow Kilgrave to augment his powers. Everything that had happened here had been a big mistake.

Kilgrave cocked his head. “No?”

And she cut Malus’ throat.

It was harder than she expected, the flesh less yielding. The knife was small. But Malus made a horrible, gurgling sound, collapsing at her feet, and blood poured out of him at an alarming rate and she stared and stared, feeling like a balloon about to pop, feeling like she was totally off her rocker—

She dropped the knife.

She should have stabbed Kilgrave too, she knew that. Made all her dreams finally come true.

But Kilgrave had dropped the envelope and photograph in shock and the red of Malus’ blood came into contact with the edge of the picture, bleeding into it, soaking it, and she swallowed, coming back to her senses.

“Give me my phone.”

Kilgrave stared at her. For the first time, he seemed to have lost his tongue.

"Look," she said. "You got me. Congratulations on the sex tape. Guess what: it's a one-time deal. Once it's out there, you don't have leverage over me anymore. So give me my phone and let's walk away and never talk about this again."

He was still staring. Then, slowly, his lips curved into a smile. "Well, the sex tape is to stop you from killing me, which I think we can both agree was a sensible precaution. If I'm gone, it'll release automatically. Just so we're clear. But given that you just killed a man, I wouldn't say that's my only leverage. That's going to need cleaning up."

"Fine," she said. "I won't kill you. You keep your pervert material to yourself. And we both walk out alive."

He took a step forward, hands in his pockets. Back to something like his usual swagger. "There is one more thing."

She'd been dreading this meeting. She'd woken up feeling awful, hadn't wanted to crawl out of bed. Maybe she could stay under the covers and somehow magically move past it without having to do anything.

Trish looked in the mirror, straightening her tie. She'd gone full-on power suit today: blazer, fuck-off high heels, hair pinned up.

It had been three days since negotiating with Kilgrave. She'd managed to put it off long enough to experiment with her newfound abilities, to find out what she'd bought and paid for. To her delight, she'd discovered more perks than quick reflexes: she could also see in the dark and she had the balance of a trained gymnast. The cat mask Kilgrave had made her wear seemed bizarrely appropriate.

But she could put it off no longer. Trish took a deep breath and headed out.

Jessica answered the door with pinched mouth, her hair a wild mess. She took one look at Trish, shook her head, then stepped back to let her in.

"Can I get you anything?"

She waved around. The apartment was a trash heap. Trish walked over and made space for herself on the couch, reflecting that the two of them had very different coping methods.

"I'm fine," she said. "Has there been any sign of Kilgrave?"

"Nope." Jessica grabbed a bottle of whiskey from the counter. "Hopefully he's dead."

"Maybe it's for the best."

She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap, wondering where to start. She'd gone over it so many times in her head, but…

Jessica didn't sit next to her like any normal person. She perched on the armrest instead so that her feet were on the couch. Looking down at her. Maybe she deserved that.

“I saw your shitty new headline,” said Jessica, indicating a crumpled newspaper on the floor. “Superheroine saves a kid? When did that happen?”

Jessica could smell bullshit a mile off. Trish didn’t deny it. She’d embellished the story, yes, but she had to start off her superhero career on the right foot. Nothing wrong with that.

“That was PR,” she said, and Jessica snorted. “I’m going to tell you the truth. I’ll tell you everything, but… Before I do… Do you remember when I brought you back home from England? You were curled up under a blanket and you told me your story. It took the whole day.”

Jessica frowned. “Yeah.”

“This is kind of like that. It’s not as long, but… I’ve done some things you’re not going to like. All I can ask right now is that you listen to what I have to say.”

Jessica said nothing, neither encouraging nor discouraging. This was different though, she thought. Jessica had returned from England traumatized by her experience with Kilgrave and Trish had been there to support her. This time… This time she had betrayed Jessica. The rawness of that hadn’t gone away.

Even so, she had to explain.

“The reason that all of this happened… the reason I went off with Kilgrave… It was because I wanted to find Karl Malus.”

Jessica’s head shot up. “Malus? The doctor?”

She nodded. “I know that he’s the reason you’re gifted. And I wanted him to do the same thing for me. He did, and then… And then I killed him.”

There. She’d said it. Jessica stared, and Trish was afraid of what she might do or say so she carried on, filling the shocked silence. She told Jessica about the deal she’d made with Kilgrave and everything that had happened after. Well, almost everything.

“It’s better if Jessica doesn’t know about our little home movie,” Kilgrave had said, and she agreed.

Her stomach churned every time she recalled the video. She hadn’t been able to bring herself to watch it all, even though Kilgrave had helpfully saved it on her phone. He’d been quick to point out that he had multiple files backed up so she wouldn’t be able to get rid of it. The few seconds of footage she had watched proved that he was telling the truth about its contents, and that was enough.

But she finished her story without mentioning the video and then looked up at Jessica, awaiting her verdict.

“You know,” said Jessica, after a long and awful pause, “I really thought that you were back under his control. You scared me to death with that phone call. But you did all of it yourself just to be like me.”

She shook her head. “I did what I did to protect myself.”

“*I* protected you!”

“No, you didn’t. I’m sorry, Jess, but you didn’t. Not every time. Not completely. As long as Kilgrave is around—”

“Don’t make this about Kilgrave.”

“If it helps, there were no emotions involved. It was just another of his shitty power trips.”

“Which you agreed to.”

“Yes. Which I agreed to. I won’t say it was my proudest moment, but I don’t regret it either. I am sorry that it hurt you.”

Jessica got up, shaking her head in disgust. “Bullshit. If you really gave a shit, you wouldn’t have done it. Forget Kilgrave. You burned down a building and then you murdered someone. Were you expecting me to forgive you?”

As she’d feared, Jessica wasn’t taking it well. She’d finished off her whiskey and she was pacing around with a kind of restless anger. Trish stood up, folding her arms.

“That wasn’t murder, it was justice. For everything Malus did to you—”

“It was murder! All of that for the chance to get yourself some powers. I hope you’re happy, because the second you put another foot wrong, I’m coming after you.”

The hypocrisy of it all was astounding. She almost couldn’t speak. Jessica had the gall to face her with that righteous fury on her face when *she* was the one who’d invited a literal psychopath into their home.

And before she could think, the words tumbled out of her.

“At least I want something! What do you want, Jess? Do you want to spend the rest of your life feeling sorry for yourself, screwing Kilgrave, then feeling bad about it and screwing him again? You can’t punish yourself forever. And it isn’t fair to threaten to punish me because you feel bad about the crimes you’ve committed. You know what, I’m done. I have spent far too long helping you, supporting you, being your shoulder to cry on, and what do I get in return? Nothing. I lost my apartment, my money — God, I’ve lost so much money because of you — I had Kilgrave taking over my mind, I was beaten senseless, and for what? So you could go crawling back to him? Wake up. You have got to help yourself, Jess, and the fact that you won’t is on no one else but you.”

“Fuck you.”

“Fuck you! I had to listen to your sob story, and you’ve done far worse things than me.”

The righteousness had disappeared at least; she’d managed that. Jessica looked wounded, her eyes full of inexpressible torment.

“Listen to yourself, Trish. Do you regret any of it? Would you have done anything differently? Because I sure as hell would. I have to live with what I’ve done, the pain of it, the guilt, the regret. I carry that with me every day.”

“And you’re miserable. I don’t intend to be miserable.”

Jessica sucked in a breath. They were at an impasse. Jessica was too stubborn to back down and she had her pride too. She meant what she’d said: she was done.

Finally, Jessica shook her head. “Trish Walker gets what she wants and screw the rest. Fine. Go to hell.”

Fine.

Trish picked up her handbag, walked out and slammed the door behind her. She didn’t look back. She ignored the tears welling in her eyes; too late for that.

This was the price she’d paid for her ambition. Not murder. Not arson. Not sex.

The price was Jessica.

A man loitered next to the elevator as she walked down the hallway, tall, thin, wearing his trademark purple suit. He raised a brow.

“We good?”

“We’re good,” she muttered. “She’s all yours.”